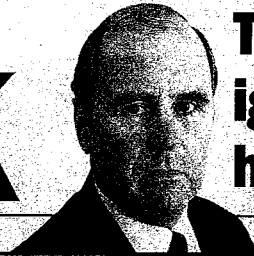


Talk

WITH REX JORY



Too easy to ignore plight of homeless youth

joryr@adv.newsltd.com.au

WE know it's happening. Most of us choose to ignore it. If we don't look, it might go away.

But every night, something like 2400 young people in South Australia - many of them children - have nowhere, safe, warm and comfortable to sleep.

The issue surfaced briefly last Friday when *The Advertiser* revealed that a girl younger than 10 had a sexually transmitted disease but authorities had taken no action. This shocking case didn't surprise Paul Edginton, the chief executive officer of the Service to Youth Council in SA.

Mr Edginton often hangs up his business suit and, in jeans and a jacket, explores the dark social crevices of SA society. It is here he finds young people with nowhere to go, no family support structure. Vulnerable, hungry and desperate.

"Children of 12, 13, 14 and 15 are a state government responsibility," he says.

"But there is no rescue plan. It is obviously acceptable to leave them there."

Mr Edginton says that every year the Service to Youth Council receives around 40,000 phone calls from young people who don't have a bed. This year, the SYC celebrates its 50th anniversary. Its role has subtly changed. The SYC once advised and directed troubled young people. Now it tries to find shelter, food, comfort and constructive activities for them.

Mr Edginton says youth homelessness has doubled in the past 20 years. The largest users of homeless assistance are people between the ages of 15 and 19. Of serious concern is that 60 per cent of these young people are girls. A young homeless woman has an eight out of 10 chance of being sexually assaulted.

He shakes his head when asked how young people are affected by homelessness. It impacts on their physical and mental health, and educational achievements.

They are excluded from school, home, employment and the broader community. When young people first enter the murky



Helping those with nowhere to go

■ The Service to Youth Council was established in South Australia on September 9, 1958.

■ It initially focused on the problems confronting young people in state-managed institutions and groups of young people "roaming" the streets.

■ One of the SYC's key services is Trace a Place, which assists young homeless and

disadvantaged people to access housing information and register for accommodation.

■ The SYC is the central referral agency for all under-25s who find themselves homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to find emergency accommodation.

■ The Service to Youth Council can be contacted on 8212 2180, 8221 6477 or 1300 306 046.

world of homelessness, 80 per cent are still at school. But this figure declines rapidly the longer they are on the streets.

"Once they break the nexus with school, it is impossible to get them back," Mr Edginton says.

The SYC is developing flexible learning options in the hope of keeping young people engaged.

His greatest concern is the girls. He says young homeless people do not want to be identified. They dress to meld in with the streetscape. But while young boys sleep rough or bunk down on someone's floor, young girls often put themselves at high risk

by accepting offers of accommodation, often with the assumption of sexual favours.

Mr Edginton does not blame young people. Homelessness can be the result of family breakdown, often stemming from irreconcilable parental conflicts. Frequently, parental separation and the addition of a new partner can create parent-adolescent conflict resulting in the young person being asked to leave.

Some young people have experienced abuse or neglect and become homeless because home is no longer safe, and living on the streets becomes a better option.

Some young people who are living independently become homeless because they cannot afford the increasing living expenses, including rent.

The SYC has been working with young people in SA for five decades. People like Paul Edginton are at the coalface. They have programs to assist young homeless people. They try to find suitable accommodation in a market which is able to command high rents for shoddy housing options.

Yet in the community debate about the homeless, about the problems of young people, the SYC profile is not high.

When asked about those groups and individuals who tend to attract headlines about youth homelessness, Mr Edginton shrugs his shoulders. He believes the issue should be the subject of detailed scientific research, not ad hoc community debate and political posturing.

But in the meantime, the SYC is continuing to do what it has done best for the past 50 years - trying to protect the most vulnerable and at-risk young people in the SA community.